

GPO Bells are Retired, but Deborah Smith Remains a 47-Year GPO Constant



Deborah Smith, Executive Assistant to the Superintendent of Documents.

Deborah Smith has been proudly serving the GPO for over four decades.

Fresh out of high school in 1972, Deborah Smith began her career at the GPO as a Clerk in the Superintendent of Documents, Cash Mail Section on the night shift. Smith was responsible for creating, updating and maintaining the plastic cards that were used to determine whether books were in or out of stock. It was important to keep those cards up-to-date since the accuracy of phone orders directly depended on this information.

After about a year she grew frustrated with working the night shift and left GPO.

At the time Smith's father was working at GPO on the day shift in the Offset Press section. When he found out that she had resigned, he suggested that she go back and try to get a job on the day shift. He told her that working at GPO was a great opportunity — one that shouldn't be taken for granted.

"My dad knew I belonged at GPO more than I did at the time," said Smith. "It was thanks to his encouragement that I am still here today."

Smith was rehired by GPO on the day shift a few months later.

"At that moment, I promised myself that I would not leave GPO until I retired," said Smith. And 46 years later Smith has kept that promise to herself.

When Smith returned to GPO she began to learn what the GPO was about and understand its important mission of Keeping America Informed.

"The more I learned about GPO, the more I realized that I wanted to be a part of helping this agency fulfill its important mission," said Smith.

As Smith reflects on the beginning of her journey at the GPO, she said, "There were over 8,000 employees at that time — that's a lot of people!"

Throughout the 1970s, GPO had strict rules about what time employees had to arrive at work as well as when they left. This was known as the bell system.

Smith recalls, "The morning bell rang at 8:00 a.m. to signal the start of the work day, and another bell sounded at 4:00 p.m. to signal the end of the day shift. If second shift employees arrived in the lobby before 4:00 p.m., they had to wait until the bell rang before they could proceed to work in the building."

Late arrival passes were required even for those employees who were one minute late to work. A GPO guard would issue and stamp a pass for you to present to your supervisor. Employees who left work early were required to obtain an early dismissal pass from the GPO guard.

Employees who wanted to leave the building any time during the day

were required to get a pass from the guard. Guards kept track of how long employees were gone from the building and employees were required to present their supervisor with passes for the proper processing of leave.

Employees were not permitted to just walk around the buildings during the day without permission or a pass from the GPO guards.

"The ringing bells and required hall passes reminded me of school," Smith said.

Smith worked in EEO from 1973 to 1975 as a Clerk Typist handling day to day administrative responsibilities. She began representing the section on Promotion Panels. And many years after leaving EEO she still continued to serve as a representative on those panels.

Next, Smith moved on to work as a Clerical Assistant in Typography and Design, and then as a Clerical Assistant in Engineering until 1980. While working in Engineering, Smith went to school for shorthand and excelled. In the 1980s, there was a high demand for secretaries who could take shorthand.

During this time, Wimbie Lewis the Assistant Public Printer, Administration, was in need of a Secretary who could take shorthand. He learned about Smith and her shorthand skills, so he asked to see her. After interviewing her, he hired her on the spot. She worked there for two years, until she was promoted to work for Mike DiMario the Deputy General Counsel of GPO at that time, who went on to be the 23rd Public Printer.

Smith said, "I remember how nervous I was taking shorthand at my first meeting on behalf of the General Counsel. It was many executives and me. It felt pretty intimidating. When Mr. DiMario realized that I was able to capture all of the meeting minutes in shorthand, he was absolutely delighted."

While working in the General Counsel's office, Smith acquired a vast knowledge regarding the legal

aspect of GPO. As a Secretary with steno (shorthand), Smith stood out as an asset to the Office of the General Counsel and at GPO as a whole. DiMario encouraged and helped advance Smith's career through many training and educational opportunities. Before GPO had a lot of employee training available, Smith attended advanced shorthand classes through the Department of Agriculture.

Around that time, Smith's sister April King came to work at GPO, where she still works as a Printer Proofreader today.

In 1987 Smith left the General Counsel's office to work for the Superintendent of Documents in the Field Operations Division as a Secretary tasked with handling the everyday administrative duties of the office.

Next, she was promoted to Staff Assistant to work with the 23 bookstores nationwide and the Pueblo Distribution Center in Pueblo, CO. She handled various projects for the Bookstore Managers and their staff. One of her responsibilities was to type all the purchase requests for supplies and contracts that were needed in each bookstore and at Pueblo. All of her typing was done on an electric typewriter, and when a mistake was made it was corrected with whiteout.

Smith recalls, "During this time everything was completed on paper with hard copies in files. As a Staff Assistant, I managed all of that too. Lots and lots of paper!"

Smith developed relationships with all the secretaries in GPO, so when any new office equipment came out that would help make typing more efficient, they would share their knowledge. She has seen the evolution from typewriter and white out to the "Wang" Processor in the early 1990s and eventually to the personal computer using Windows 95 software.

Smith said, "Before GPO had voicemail, secretaries were responsible for answering telephones, so they mostly stayed in their offices."

Next Smith went to work directly for the Superintendent of Documents, Judith Russell. Russell opened doors for Debbie that gave her opportunities



Executive Assistant Deborah Smith with her supervisor Laurie Hall, Superintendent of Documents & Managing Director of Library Services and Content Management.

to shine tremendously in her work. She began to travel, and attended training classes and conferences. Under Russell's supervision, Smith's dedication and hard work was recognized in the form of a promotion to Executive Assistant.

At this time Smith worked on the 8th floor of GPO adjacent to Office of the Director. This afforded her the opportunity to learn and work with the Director's staff on projects and events.

She eventually moved to the fifth floor to begin working with the other Library staff to prepare for the Depository Library Council Meetings. She says she really enjoyed working with the Council members and preparing their Invitational Travel Orders and reimbursements.

Smith said, "It was a pleasure to travel for the conferences. Typically, the Spring Council Meeting would be held in another state and Fall Conference would be held locally."

Smith said she truly enjoyed working alongside Russell until Russell's retirement in 2007.

Next, Smith worked for Ric Davis when he was Acting Superintendent of Documents.

Smith says she admired Ric as her supervisor, and that they worked well together. According to Smith, Davis always looked out for her best interests and allowed her the opportunity to advance in her career through numerous training and educational

opportunities. By this time, she had worked 34 years exclusively at GPO, and knew the Office of the Superintendent of Documents like the back of her hand.

Smith next served as Executive Assistant to Superintendent of Documents Mary Alice Baish beginning in January 2011 until Baish retired in 2016.

Then in 2016, Debbie went to work with Superintendent of Documents Laurie Hall and her staff on the 5th floor where she continues to work today.

"I really enjoy working with Laurie and her staff," said Smith. "It feels like a family."

"Debbie is literally our go to for everything," said Hall. "She is an office dynamo, an exemplary professional, and a role model for customer service. She's extremely patient and focused, diffusing any issue or problem with incredible professionalism. All of our library community knows her and respects her tireless contributions."

For the foreseeable future, Smith intends to continue working.

Smith says, "I have enjoyed working here since I stepped my foot back in the door on the day shift in 1973! GPO is the best and only place I have ever wanted to work!"

Editor's Note:

This is part of a series of articles focused on employees with 40+ years of Federal service. We look forward to sharing their GPO experience with you.

—Michelle R. Overstreet